

The Spiritual Vacuum and the Need for Belonging in Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*

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"Why was I born without a skin,

O' God ? "¹

The American individual has been yoked under the heavy burden of his/ her quite impossible aspiration of belonging in this world which is confined to the technological progression, the material development and the rejection of God. In this place of "unexplainable conditions combining hope and hopelessness where the sensitive man [dwells], facing extinction in modern society and searching for his identity ..." , Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) appears with his characters who are "obsessed, driven,[and] haunted" heroes as a truth speaker searching for (understanding the absolute)². O'Neill is the master of American Drama and has attracted the attention of critics around the world with his notable achievement. His men, like modern men, are lonely, alienated, and lacking in a sense of belonging. Besides, O'Neill has remarkably "become a major influence on the modern American theatre, exploring difficult subjects and experimenting with a variety of dramatic styles"³.

In his play *The Hairy Ape* (1922), which is a tragic monologue consisting of eight scenes, the inner struggle is externalized symbolically when the hero Yank surrenders to his inner self although the conflict begins and ends as a war with outer reality:

On the surface, the play is a series of vignettes dramatizing the bewilderment of a powerful stoker, Yank, when his naive confidence in brute power is shaken, and his desperate efforts to find a place for himself in the world 'to belong' as he puts it; on more sophisticated level, Yank's fate expressed man's search for the meaning of his life and his alienation in the universe.⁴

O'Neill himself says that the play is about a man who :

.., has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way.... The subject here.., is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt 'to belong'.⁵

In *The Hairy Ape* the idea of travel in search for the self is a recurrent means of expressing the inner struggle of the hero. Yank who "seems broader, fiercer, more truculent, more powerful, more sure of himself than the rest"⁶ at the beginning of the play, travels in search for his identity, as well as for his

revenge⁷. Particularly after his meeting with the rich lady Mildred, he feels himself pulled apart from his natural surroundings : the stokehole. This concept permeates through out the entire play:

The effect sought after is a cramped space in the bowels of a ship, imprisoned by white steel. The lines of banks, the uprights supporting them, cross each other like the steel framework of a cage. The ceiling crushes down upon the men's heads. They can not stand upright.

(scene 1, p. 2)

And all the stokers are regarded as "the bewildered, furious baffled defiance of a beast in a cage" (scene 1, p. 1). Here the alienation as a sense of displacement is more fundamental than the social clash between the rich and the poor.

Action and sound effects are also entangled to achieve an overall coordinated impression in the play. The metallic sounds up to scene 3 suggest the stoker's feelings of belonging to the ship, of forming an inseparable unity with the engine. There is also a strange impression of order and assonance over the combination of the "tumult of noise- the brazen clang of the furnace doors as they are flung open or slammed shut, the grating, teeth- gritting grind of steel against steel, of crunching coal" (scene 3, p. 34), reinforcing the idea that these men are 'happy' to work in their modern, cage-like hell. There is "rhythm" and "order" in their movement to indicate their inner conviction of being important and useful to society as:

They bend over, looking neither to right nor left, handling their shovels as if they were part of their bodies, with a strange, awkward, swinging, rhythm. They use the shovels to throw open the furnace doors.

(scene 3, p. 33)

Yank and all the other men are alike for they are pictures of the "Neanderthal Man" (scene 1, p. 2). They are "hairy- chested, with long arms of tremendous power, and low, receding brows above their small, fierce, resentful eyes." (scene 1, p. 2). But Yank seems "broader, fiercer," (scene 1, p. 2) which leads him to be the representative of the group.

In the cramped and prison like fore-castle of a transatlantic liner, Yank glories in his obvious superiority over the other stokers, in 'belonging', in being part of the steel and machinery that run the ship.⁸

In scene 4, Yank is no longer the leader of the group because the others feel, as he also does, that now he does not belong to the stokehole. This feeling haunts him when "Mildred, the daughter of a multi-millionaire, visits the filthy stokehole" in the third scene and "destroys the social equilibrium by which the ship has managed to sail"⁹. O'Neill's aim in this play is to search

... for self knowledge and [he] used all means at his disposal intellectual and theatrical, to pursue the greatest challenge- to 'justify the ways of God to man'- he dramatized a society where all forces, both the natural and the supernatural, might be seen at work in man -to- God as well as man -to- man relations.¹⁰

Ironically, this knowledge causes the destruction of Yank at the critical moment of his meeting with Mildred. To think is the error of Yank. Something has made him start thinking. From now on, everything will be more real and therefore, harder for him.¹¹

This point is again reinforced by the audiovisual metallic images as they appear in the play as the expressionistic means to strengthen the overall impression about the characters to be conveyed in every situation. The metallic sound has thus turned against Yank : "Repeating the word after him as one with cynical mockery 'Think!' the word has a brazen metallic quality as is in their throats were phonograph horns" (scene 4, P. 41). This makes him feel insecure for the first time. A 'fluctuation' between self-assurance and fear is observed throughout the play and as Anisul Haque notes that "the characters of the play share an insecurity and protect it with a cynical mood of speech"¹².

On the contrary, at the beginning of the play, Yank's authority is restated by the metallic sound that his comrades make to recognize his superiority over all others. This is clear when Paddy, the old stoker, argues with him about the loss of the spirit of the ancient mariners : "the chorused word has a brazen metallic quality as if their throats were phonograph horns. It is followed by a general uproar of hard, barking laughter" (scene 1, p. 7). Later on in the play, as we have seen above, the metallic sound turns against Yank, for he no longer belongs to the steel –surrounded stokehole. Although later in the play as Gene A. Plunka affirms, "we have again the metaphor of steel worker as beast/automaton imprisoned in a cage, the concept of belonging as beast in a cage is seriously questioned"¹³.

The sense of loss and the spiritual emptiness are deepened by the contrasts of characters and settings along the play. *The_Hairy Ape* has multiple settings, yet, Yank" is a man without a place in the world, and during the course of the play, he wonders in search for one"¹⁴. Thinking that the stokehole is his 'home' for some time and ending with "the gorilla's cage at the zoo", Yank visits many settings which are just other cages for him as Steven F : Bloom states :

In between cages, Yank visits Fifth Avenue in New York City, a prison on Black Wells Island (very much like another cage), and I.W.W local headquarters on the water front, all real places with a touch of the surreal, usually conveyed through the lighting¹⁵

Walking by Fifth Avenue in New York with "this dirty dungarees. A fireman's cap with black peak...[and] he has not shaved for days" (scene 5, p. 54), Yank is "a procession of gaudy marionette, yet with something of the relentless horror of Frankenstein in the detached mechanical unawareness." (scene 5, p. 61). Yank is not even seen by the well -to- do group, homogenous by identical clothes and voices. He is now discordant with "a general atmosphere of clean, well tidied, wide street; a

flood of mellow, tempered sunshine; gentle, genteel breezes" (scene 5, p.61). This indicates that Yank is lost in a world to which he cannot relate, he even loses the connection between the past and the present.

All these elements establish a conflict with Yank and also with the jewels and furs displayed in two shop windows, specially when Long, another stoker, states that "one of these 'ere would buy scoff for a starvin' family for a year!" (scene 5, p. 58). Furthermore, a conflict between the individual and the group is also expressed here. Realizing the spiritual emptiness that he is living, and understanding his urgent need to belong to overcome his sense of being lost, Yank expresses bitterly : "All dis gives me a pain. It don't belong. All dis is too clean and quite and dolled-up, get me! It gives me a pain." (scene 5, p. 56).

Moreover, in scene 2, the colored setting contrasts with the impression created by the stokehole in the first one. The impression "to be conveyed by this scene is one of the beautiful, vivid life of the sea all about-sunshine on the deck in a great flood, the fresh sea wind blowing across it" (scene 2, p. 21). This setting matches perfectly with Paddy's character and longing for the good old times :

Oh, to be back in the fine days of my youth, ochone! Oh, there was fine beautiful ships them days-clippers wid tall masts touching the sky-fine strong men in them- men that was sones of the sea as if 't was the mother that bore them. Oh, the clean skins of them, and the clear eyes, the straight backs and full chests of them! ... we'd be making sail in the dawn, with a fair breeze... .
(scene 1, p.12)

Ironically enough, Paddy remembers the beautiful past while he is standing in front of the fire and imprisoned in the stokehole. And the characters who are sitting in the vivid scene of the sea are Mildred and her aunt, the symbols of the Industrial Revolution and the materialistic society. The two delicate women are totally out of place in this setting, just as Paddy was in the forecastle. This is clear in O'Neill's description of them:

In the midst of this, these two incongruous, artificial figures, inert and disharmonious, the elder like a gray lump of dough touched up with rouge, the younger looking as if the vitality of her stock had been sapped before she was conceived, so that she is the expression not of its life energy but merely of the artificialities that energy has won for itself in the spending.
(scene 2, p. 21)

Contrasts between characters and settings such as the latter reaffirm O'Neill's message through a sharp irony, which in turn adds a comic touch to the play and intensifies the spiritual dilemma of the hero.

The journey of Yank from the stokehole to the Fifth Avenue parallels the journey of his mind. He leaves the other workers who are like "chained gorillas" (scene 3, p. 34) to see the other face of the world.¹⁶ Scene 3 represents the core and the climax of the play. The encounter of Yank and Mildred is a focal image, where a

fusion of expressionistic devices takes place. Tone and intensity of colors and lights mark various contrasts between characters and settings, and create a general impression of this scene through the superposing of significant details.

When Mildred enters, dressed in white, which contrasts with the dark surroundings, Yank is not aware of her presence at first. In this regard, John Nickel states that "by putting Yank in blackface, O'Neill cleverly critiques contemporary arguments for black racial retrogression...to convince his audience that degeneration is not biological-or racial- but cultural"¹⁷. The annoying whistle of the engineer keeps him away from work as he curses it in a "sudden fury" (scene 3, p. 37). He notices something behind him "like a white apparition in full light from the open furnace doors" (scene 3, p. 38), and "glares into her eyes, turned to a stone" (scene 3, p. 38). At the same time, Mildred "has listened, paralyzed with horror, terror, her whole personality crushed, beaten in, collapsed, by the terrific impact of this unknown, abysmal brutality, naked and shameless" (scene 3, p. 38). She then faints and is taken away, which makes Yank feel insulted "in some unknown fashion in the very heart of his pride." (scene 3, p. 38)¹⁸.

From scene 4 until the end of the play, Yank's monologue becomes O'Neill's means for emotional impact, for the former is pulled apart from his natural surroundings in order to search for his identity, and for his revenge as well. Yank convinces himself that Mildred is a ghost, and he misunderstands Mildred's expression "filthy beast" for "hairy ape" (scene 3, p. 38). From now on he transforms himself into a "hairy ape" as if fulfilling his worst predictions. But nobody is concerned about Yank's feelings of "not belonging" until he transgresses the social rules with his actions against society. When he is led into prison, he feels the prison as a community similar to the one in the stokehole of the ship :

The cells extend back diagonally from right to left rear, they do not stop, but disappear in the dark background as if they ran on, numberless, into infinity. One eclectic light bulb from the low ceiling of the narrow corridor sheds light through the heavy steel bars of the cell at extreme front and reveals part of the interior.

(scene 6, p. 65)

An electric bulb is set for the lighting as in the stokehole scene. Yank rejects any kind of religious or social solution to his problem. According to Bigsby, "in *The Hairy Ape* character is reduced to type and compacted into a political, moral and physical space which allows no scope for maneuver."¹⁹. But he realizes after listening to the other convicts, "VOICES (scornfully) : Hurrah for de Fort' of July! Pass the hat! Liberty! Justice! Honor! Opportunity!" (scene 6, p. 73), that he does not even belong there. In existential terms, society, authority, and God all contribute to the design of a meaningless humanity. So, in a sense "Yank is a newborn existentialist insisting upon his existence amid his own unfathomable chaos".²⁰

Yank's search for his identity is always associated with the idea of the "cage" with an "electric bulb", where he feels momentarily at ease. The "cage" surrounded by "steel" represents for Yank the means of protection from outer reality. Steel has been his element until his meeting with Mildred. The "electric bulb" intensifies the idea

that his life is somewhat enlightened by his comfortable feeling of "belonging" to his surroundings. This is why in the forecastle, the prison, and the zoo, where Yank is repeatedly enclosed by the physical space and by steel, there is "barking laughter" to indicate that Yank has belonged to something.

In prison, Yank reads, an "anarchist" paper that contains a critique of the Industrial Workers of the World American Labor Union, and he decides that his future may be there. Later he enters the locale and stays there until at last, he is kicked out, and he realizes his mistake :

"With a growl he starts to get up and storm the closed door, but stops bewildered by the confusion of his brain, pathetically impotent. He sits there, brooding, in as near to the attitude of Rodin's 'The Thinker' as he can get in his position".

(scene 7, p. 89).

In fact "The Thinker symbolizes O'Neill's expressionistic projection of Yank's confusion and it reminds us of Mallarme's creed that to name is to destroy, to suggest is to create"²¹. It is as if he is now fully aware of his situation in society : he belongs when he is in steel, but now the world controls him because he is no longer in steel. In other words, he is not conveniently useful to the rest of society, which may be regarded as the spiritual tragedy of the mechanical age.²²

The last action of Yank's murder by the gorilla is anticipated by the scenic image of a fateful moonlight as Plunka describes it :

In a sarcastic reaction to Andrew Carnegie's spirit of Social Darwinism, O'Neill allows Yank in the last four scenes, during his quest for belonging, to move from the purity of evolutionary development through modern technology to the fringes of society and finally to animality -a type of reverse Darwinism. As a mockery of Carnegie's perfect society in harmony with modern technology, O'Neill takes the proletarian sub race through a descent from modern industrialism / commercialism at its finest (Fifth Avenue) back to its evolutionary origins (the ape).²³

In scene 8, there is only a dim light and shadows in the setting : "One spot of gray light falls on the front of one cage so that the interior can be seen". (scene 8, p. 92). When the gorilla gives him the "murderous hug", Yank becomes aware that he belongs to nowhere, while even the gorilla still belongs to the world. In the setting of the last scene of *The Hairy Ape* in the Monkey House of the Bronx Zoo, O'Neill mocks the comparison of individuals of African heritage to apes.²⁴

At the end of Yank's grotesque death, O'Neill cannot avoid adding his final, genuinely tragic comment : "He slips in a heap on the floor and dies. The monkeys set up a chattering, whimpering wail. And perhaps, the Hairy Ape at last belongs". (scene 8, p.96) . Bloom, simply, defines the play as the following :

The story of *The Hairy Ape* is simple. Yank's position at the bottom of the social ladder and his opposition to those at the top are established in the first four scenes; in each subsequent scene, he attempts to find a place for himself in society. Unable to fit in anywhere, he ends up in the gorilla's cage at the zoo, where he dies alone.²⁵

From another point of view, however, *The Hairy Ape* can be seen as a play with a circular structure regarding Yank's expressionistic journey into his inner self. This structure responds to a theme, which is closer to the audience, for it resumes the main struggle of modern man in the twentieth-century industrialized world, a world

where industrialization has alienated man rather than unifying him with his brothers. And instead of offering a solution, O'Neill leaves Yank in a zoo cage of a gorilla with whom he hopes to communicate, but ironically he faces his tragic death on the hands of his murderous brother.

NOTES

¹ Eugene O'Neill, cited in Walter J. Meserve, "Arrival of a Master Playwright, Eugene O'Neill", in *The Revels History of Drama in English, Vol. 8 : American Drama*, ed. T.W. Craik (London : Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1977), P. 219.

² Ibid., p. 221.

³ Michael Abbott et al. *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, ed. Dominic Head, (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2006) P. 829.

⁴ John Gassner, *Eugene O'Neill*, (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1965), P. 19.

⁵ Eugene O'Neill, *New York Herald Tribune* (November 16, 1924), cited in Ibid.

⁶ Eugene O'Neill, *The Hairy Ape*, @ SPARKNOTES, 2006, scene 1, P. 2,. All subsequent quotation are taken from this site and will be referred to by scene and page numbers.

⁷ A point which is really similar to Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* (1959) where the hero travels in search for his self and belonging and ends with his tragic death.

⁸ Myron Matlaw, *Modern World Drama : An Encyclopedia*, (New York : E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1972), p. 329.

⁹ S.E. Wilmer, "Censorship and Ideology : Eugene O'Neill *The Hairy Ape*", University of Dublin, P. 3. (accessed on November, 15, 2008).

¹⁰ Meserve, *The Revels*, p. 223.

¹¹ Murray states that:

we experience simultaneously the objective detachment of the events on stage and the subjectivity of Yank. In this way, we notice three levels of reality : the theatrical play on stage, the play as the mind of Yank, and the presence of The Thinker as a mediator between the two, fusing the objective and subjective worlds.

Keat Murray, "O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* and Rodin's The Thinker", *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* 19. 1-2 (1998), p. 109.

¹² Anisul Haque, "Eugene O'Neill's Earnest Gesture : *The Dreamy Kid*, *The Emperor Jones*, *All God's Chillum Got Wings*." *Indian Journal of American Studies* 28. 1-2 (1998), p. 73.

¹³ Gene A. Plunka, "Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* and the Legacy of Andrew Carnegie", *The Eugene O'Neill Review* 23. 1-2 (1999), p 39.

¹⁴ Steven F. Bloom, *Student Companion to Eugene O'Neill*, (London : Greenwood Press, 2007) p. 72.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The relationship between the Irish and the African American is also suggested symbolically here. Anisul Haque, p. 77.

¹⁷ John Nickel, "Racial Degeneration and *The Hairy Ape*", *The Eugene O'Neill Review* 22. 1-2 (1998), p. 35.

¹⁸ David Roediger relates Mildred's visit into the stokehole to a colonial position, typified as the master-slave relationship in the early part of the twentieth century.

David Roediger, "White Looks : Hairy Apes, True Stories and Limbaugh's Laughs", *Minnesota Review* 47 (1997), p. 39.

¹⁹ C.W.E. Bigsby, *A critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*, 3 Vols. (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 63.

²⁰Murray, p. 110.

²¹Lillian Herlands Hornstein, et al., *The Readers Companion to World Literature* (New York : Mentor, 1984) p. 507.

²²Gene A. Plunka, p. 34., notes that :

O'Neill refers to steel twenty-one times in the first part and twenty-one in the second, because *The Hairy Ape* explores the motif of the dichotomy between Paddy's romanticized view of nature and the brutal dehumanization of modern industrialization.

²³Plunka, p. 40.

²⁴Travis Bogard, *Contour in Time : The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1972) p. 244.

According to him :

O'Neill's original plan for drama, Yank returns in the final scene to the stokehole where he no longer belongs and feels completely alienated. In the final version, however, the playwright has Yank, rejected by human society, identified with a gorilla in the Monkey House.

²⁵Bloom, p. 72.

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